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THE NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMING IN THE COMMUTER UNIVERSITY.

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EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$0.48 12P.

DESCRIPTORS- *COMMUTING STUDENTS, *MENTAL HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS, DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS, FAMILY INFLUENCE, *COLLEGE STUDENTS, *PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS, PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS, *NONRESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, UNIVERSITIES, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, CHICAGO CIRCLE CAMPUS

AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE COLLEGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IS THE STUDENT'S SEPARATION FROM HOME AND FAMILY. LARGE NUMBERS OF COMMUTER STUDENTS HAVE AVOIDED THE NORMAL DEVELOPMENTAL TASK OF LEAVING HOME FOR REASONS OTHER THAN FINANCIAL LIMITATIONS. THE STUDENT MAY, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE FEELINGS OF INADEQUACY IN THE SOCIAL-SEXUAL SPHERE, OR HIS PARENTS MAY BE FEARFUL OF HIS SEPARATION FROM TRADITIONAL FAMILIAL AND SUBCULTURAL MORES AND VALUES. THE COMBINATION OF STUDENTS FROM BROKEN HOMES, FROM HOMES OF LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, AND THOSE STUDENTS WHO HAVE INDIVIDUAL PATHOLOGIES RESULTS IN A HIGHER RATE OF AND A MORE SEVERE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN COMMUTER SCHOOL STUDENTS THAN IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL STUDENTS. THE SOCIOCULTURAL HETEROGENEITY OF THE CHICAGO CIRCLE CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS IS CONTRASTED WITH THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION. WAYS IN WHICH FAMILY PATHOLOGY MAY IMPEDE A COMPUTER STUDENT'S DEVELOPMENT ARE DISCUSSED. THE URBAN COMMUTER UNIVERSITY HAS ALL THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE'S NEEDS FOR A MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM PLUS ADDITIONAL NEEDS OUTLINED IN THIS ARTICLE. THE STRONG RELATIONSHIP EXISTING BETWEEN PSYCHOSOCIAL DIFFICULTIES AND COLLEGE DROPOUTS INDICATES THE NEED FOR BETTER COLLEGE MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS. (PS)

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THE NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMING IN THE COMMUTER UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Mental health of college students has been extensively discussed in recent years. However, nearly all the publications have dealt with the student at residential colleges. Perhaps half of the five million students in college today attend a commuter school, living at home rather than at the school. The commuter students are a neglected group from the point of view of studies of their mental health. The following then are some comments about the mental health of urban commuter university students and some contrasts with residential college youth.

With probably a majority of student across the country a college education is associated with "going away to college"--i.e., leaving home, gaining release from parental authority, having a new opportunity to establish one's autonomy, and to enjoy more freedom in controlling one's own life. Going away to college is also accorded more prestige than staying at home and is endowed with visions of glamour and adventure. It is even believed by some educators that one of the important factors in the college learning experience is the separation from home and family.

Deferred Developmental Task

Thus it might be postulated that the commuter student has for various reasons avoided or delayed the normal developmental task of leaving home. The reason given most commonly (probably because it is most acceptable to the family, the university, and to the student himself) is financial limitations. There is certainly no question that this is a large factor with those who do come from low income families. There are a surprising number, however, whose families do have sufficient means to help them go to a residential school. Most of these students never really wanted to go away to college. The cost factor is not the main reason why they chose the commuter university and deferred the developmental phase of separation from family.

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It seems that especially feelings of inadequacy in the social-sexual sphere is apt to make these youth elect to remain at home while going to college. The prospect of having to live with others in a dormitory, make new friends, and adapt to the social expectations of campus living is appalling to such individuals. They rationalize by saying it would be easier to have good study conditions at home, whereas in a dormitory there would be too much horseplay and noise and there would be too many distractions on the campus of a residential college.

Factors in Selection of a Commuter School

Multiple complex factors, conscious and unconscious, enter into the process of the selection of a particular college by a student. Silber and his associates in a study at the National Institute of Mental Health[6] state: "...students predetermine to some extent the nature of the challenge of the college experience to which they will expose themselves." A study of non-patient as well as "patient" students at our urban commuter school revealed the fact that a significant proportion of these students seem to select the nonresidential school because of their individual and/or family pathology. With questioning some admitted that even had they unlimited finances they would not have chosen to go away to college. Others expressed a weak wish to go away, but on study it was found that there were strong psychological forces compelling them to stay at home. The low cost and yet rather high quality of the education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, appealed greatly to these students; but with those who could have managed the cost at a residential school and chose not to, it appeared to be a measure of their self-doubts that they enrolled in the commuter school. Fearing failure (often irrationally), they do not commit themselves heavily to costly educational programs. They invest only a little, financially and emotionally. They enter college tentatively, on a trial basis, keeping themselves more free to drop out if failure seem imminent or interest wanes.

The parents of these commuter students tend to be fearful of the changes from traditional familial and subcultural mores and values that might occur if their offspring attend college away from home. The commuter school--offering college education

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while living at home in close contact and with continued interaction with the family --often represents an acceptable compromise to student and parents.

Although this has not been studied statistically, our experience would lead us to postulate that a substantial proportion of students select a commuter school for multiple reasons which have to do with individual and/or family pathology.

1. There is a considerable group from unstable or broken homes: i.e., homes where the parents are separated or divorced, one parent is ill or dead, a parent is alcoholic or mentally ill, etc.

2. There is another large group from families of lower socioeconomic status. As he was growing-up, the student shared the many fateful consequences of this status such as bad housing, strife-ridden neighborhoods, unwholesome peer group influences, poor schools, possibly greater psychopathology in parents, and a host of other factors. These factors do not result in personality disorder in the student in all cases, but we postulate that they do in the aggregate tend to result in a higher rate and more severe degree of disorders of personality.

3. There is still another group of students who do not come from broken homes or families of below average socioeconomic status but who nevertheless have individual pathology which is related to their selection of this commuter school. In this latter category are not only students who start out at the commuter school, but also some who began at a residential college and then, overwhelmed by the stress, regress to living at home and commuting to college.

It is our hypothesis that the combination of the three groups above results in a higher rate and more severe psychopathology in the student population of a commuter school as compared with most residential schools.

Isolation and Indecision

In the residential university, membership in one or more groups provides some support for the individual student as he reaches out for more self-assurance and struggles to forge some individuality. In the city college, by contrast, the activity

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and fraternal groups are relatively weak and may not evoke the strong loyalty and devotion that they bring forth in the residential school. The membership in a group which transmits values, shares problems, and helps maintain morale is often unavailable and/or unsought by the commuter student. This contributes to his difficulty in working through the identity crisis, i.e. formulating some clear ideas about who he is and where he is going in life.

The college student faces some decisions about educational and occupational choice, social role, and ideological identity. But the personality characteristics of some commuter students make such decisions very difficult. Even the deferment of the developmental task of leaving home impedes the process of identity formation. Wedge and Davie[7] point out that the impetus to processes of self-definition is furnished not only by the anticipation of adulthood but by the impact of leaving the family. This throws upon the student the necessity to gain recognition and take positions for himself as distinct from those which depended on the family. Erikson[8] writes concerning the late adolescent who stalls in the job of forging an identity for himself: "Any marked avoidance of choices leads to a sense of outer isolation and to an inner vacuum". Quite a few commuter college students seem to avoid choices.

Sociocultural Heterogeneity

The context of clinical work in our college mental health service has, by its nature, made us keenly aware of sociocultural variations and their relationship to the psychologic problems and academic performance of students. The population of students at many universities is quite different from that on our campus. The spectrum of different sociocultural characteristics is particularly broad at our school, which draws its students from a cross section of the Chicago "melting pot". The Chicago Circle Campus of the University of Illinois, being a low-tuition state university in the heart of the city, attracts a higher proportion of students from various low-income, disadvantaged, and minority groups. The campus, in comparison with most others, has a larger proprotion of students who are first-generation college-goers, first or second-generation Americans, with parents from blue collar or lower-level white collar

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occupations. There are distinct cliques of youths of Negro, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Greek, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukranian origin enrolled in the university. It is heartening to see these youths struggling to raise their intellectual, social, and economic status through higher education.

As the proportion of young people who finish high school and go on to college increases, other colleges, too, are admitting students from a wider range of social classes. The previous tendency toward a more homogeneous group of students from the upper middle class, with parents in professional or higher-level business positions has been changing. This change has been consciously directed by some colleges through offering more scholarships, financial aid, and part-time jobs on campus. Some schools have been deliberately recruiting students with high potential from minority and disadvantaged groups. Promising Negro students, in particular, have recently been the target of active recruitment. This move has been prompted by the heightened consciousness of civil-rights issues among college faculty and administrators.

The number of such students from lower socio-economic levels and minority groups is, of course, greater in a state-supported urban commuter university such as ours. The single most important reason for this is financial. The cost of college education is more than can be managed by the families of most of the students from handicapped and minority groups. Even with scholarship aid or attendance at a low-tuition state institution, the cost of a residential college for four years or more is a heavy burden for the family.

Family Handicaps

The parents of the nonresidential college student, as compared with the parents of the residential student, are probably less able to facilitate his growth and development. The parents of the nonresidential students may even have more individual psychopathology than their counterparts, the parents of residential students. Support for this hypothesis is found in the results of the Midtown Manhattan Study (a large scale survey of the mental health of an urban population)[10]. This study found that progressively lower parental socioeconomic status carries for the child progressively larger

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risk of impaired mental health during adulthood and progressively smaller chances of achieving good mental health. Some of the reasons advanced by Srole and his associates to explain these important findings may be summarized as follows: In the lower-middle to middle-middle socioeconomic strata the family income permits a tolerable but hardly ample standard of living and certainly does not permit the accumulation of any significant reserve funds. This tightrope living standard is the foundation of these families' claim to respectability. When crises jeopardize the economic supports of this way of life, the strain placed upon personality resources may be great. Srole postulates that in these lower groups such factors tend to penetrate the family unit with pathogenic effects, while in the upper SES groups there are sociocultural processes which work with eugenic effects. The more affluent,managerial and professional classes have a more secure, expansive, ego-nurturing way of life with larger buffers against the inevitable abrasions and hard knocks of human existence. Individuals from this type of background have a much greater chance of achieving good mental health and much less risk of serious impairment. The Manhattan Study found significantly higher rates of such pathological dimensions as neurasthenic and psychosomatic symptoms, depression, hostile suspiciousness, isolation, rigidity, and immaturity in lower SES groups. Such pathology, probably present in greater degree in parents of commuter students, would have significant adverse effects on the personality development of these students.

The parents of students at a commuter school not infrequently see college education for an offspring as conferring upon him a superiority which is desired--but also envied and feared. Especially the father, with all rivalry of the "reversed Oedipus" complex may be driven to jealously,compete with the son for top status in the family. The father may seize every excuse to belittle education in general and his son's efforts in particular. It is not unusual to hear of a father telling his boy, "you'll never amount to anything," with little provocation for such a sweeping disparagement. Or instead of

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such overt depreciation, the father may subtly sabotage or passively discourage his son's educational endeavors.

The commuter student's father is very often not secure in his accomplishments and status achievement. The father's insecurity about his own masculinity and adequacy leads him to depreciate and undermine his son's strivings. Threatened by his son's growing power, the insecure father is not able to identify with the young man in his strivings and to enjoy his increasing strength. Instead, he often fears being conquered, rendered feeble and impotent, so that he reacts aggressively. The student, for his part in such situations, becomes exceedingly competitive and hostile toward his father. The oedipal rivalry is magnified and distorted.

The home and the social background of the commuter student often do not provide the support and motivation for him to seek a residential college education. But a youngster bright and ambitious enough to seek college work despite such a background will elect to try it out at a low-cost commuter school. He will bring with him his hopes for achievement and his healthy drives toward growth and mastery, but along with it will come the handicapping pathology derived from his background and/or his unique individual impairment.

It is not proposed that the entire student population of this or other nonresidential schools is made up of students whose mental health is impaired or who have been exposed to the trauma and deprivation described. There are not only some students whose mental health may remain unimpaired in spite of stressful experiences, but also some students whose selection of the commuter college is not primarily motivated by the pathological factors described. For example, there are those who plan a long, costly educational program. Their decision to attend all or part of their undergraduate college at the nonresidential school may represent good judgment. There are students who do enjoy satisfying and growth-promoting relationships with parents; some are able to achieve a high degree of self-reliance and maturity while living at home.

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Greater Vulnerability

It may be that there are greater numbers of vulnerable people with a higher potential for mental disorder (and also for college dropout or failure) in an urban commuter university vs. a residential one. At the very least we suspect in a higher proportion of the students, the parental models with which the students can identify are less adequate and less well suited to successful adaptation in college or in life in general.

Some of the background factors are particularly likely to contribute to academic failure---factors which combine to create discontinuity between the family and cultural background of the student, on the one hand, and his college experience and anticipation of his future role as a college-educated professional or business executive, on the other hand. Srole and his colleagues, in the Midtown Manhattan study[15], emphasize role discontinuity as one of the major phenomena conducive to emotional disturbance.

In addition there is perhaps greater damage done to future life and mental health of the commuter student vs. the residential student if effective help is not given. The residential college student is probably more resilient, less easily defeated, so that he may come back for a second or third try at college. Or if he gives up college he may be more apt to eventually find some career into which he can plunge with vigor. The residential student has more depth to his defenses, both psychologically and financially. The city college youngster---on the other hand--is more likely to take failure as a final closing of the college door and to have less personal resourcefulness and less family aid to get started in some other productive career. He may be more liable to settle apathetically into a mediocre job and uninspired life, giving up any aspirations to grow and progress.

While there may be more pathology in the commuter student as compared to the residential student, it should be remembered that he probably has more strengths than his peers who do not enter college at all. And the potential for change and improvement with psychotherapy or other appropriate help in the college groups is said by many authorities to be remarkably high.

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Thus we believe the urban commuter university has all the same needs for a mental health program which the residential school has, plus the additional needs and opportunities outlined here. The need for preventive mental health measures in some residential schools has been recognized. There the college administration is more accepting of the responsibility to act in loco parentis. But in the commuter university mental health facilities have been largely neglected on the assumption that if the student is living at home, his family will provide for his health needs and will utilize community health services as necessary. Particularly in the mental health area this is often an erroneous assumption.

College Attrition and Mental Health

American colleges lose half their students in the four years after matriculation. Some authorities have estimated that over half of the college dropouts are due to psychosocial rather than strictly academic difficulties. It is probable that this is even more true of college students from minority and underprivileged backgrounds.

Particularly now that the wave of post-World War II babies has reached college age, so that colleges have a selectivity higher than ever, there is little justification for this survival-of-the-fittest philosophy which rejects so many. The rationale for this method of elimination seems more in terms of the need of the college system than in terms of what is really best for the students. The need of the college system seems to be that of reducing its intake of students to more manageable proportions. Thus, it takes in more than it can digest, then regurgitates half back to the community as though they were uneducable.

Recently, society has been focusing attention on the failure of the educational process at lower levels. It is only a matter of time until there is demand for more careful examination of the attrition rates of universities. The negative consequences of college failure for individuals and for society are no less than the consequences of dropout from the secondary schools.

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If our public urban universities are to meet their obligation to provide higher education for the masses, they must experiment with approaches (educational and mental health) suitable for commuter students. Such research lies in the overlapping and mutually enriching areas of the behavioral sciences and education.

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